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Hot Topics

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The Paraeducator Paradox

By Patricia H. Mueller, Ed.D.

What's the "Paraeducator Paradox?"

"Par'a.doxx, n. A person, situation, or the like, seemingly full of inconsistencies or contradictions."

What's the contradiction? Special education has become a system that depends heavily on relatively untrained, under-paid, and devalued staff members to provide complex instructional and behavioral programs to our most challenging students. Something is not right with that picture...this is what I refer to as the "paraeducator paradox."

The following is a brief description of some of the larger issues and growing concerns that surround the employment, training, retention and support of paraeducators. The ideas presented come from research; many are from the numerous paraeducators with whom I've worked over the past fourteen years. My hat goes off to these dedicated professionals!

Issues and Concerns:

Inadequate orientation and professional development

Paraeducators aren't "aides" anymore, running the ditto machine and performing clerical tasks. They spend most of their time providing instruction, and many report they independently plan instruction for students. Additionally, most paraeducators report they receive little or no training to perform these roles. Most training occurs on the job or from another paraeducator. If they do



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receive orientation training, the focus is most typically on confidentiality, while many other important topics - orientation to the classroom and students, reporting suspected abuse or neglect, home/school communication - are not discussed.

If paraeducators are paid to attend the district in-service workshops, they often report that the topics are irrelevant. They also report inconsistencies in payment to attend either in-district or out-of-district inservice, thus decreasing their ability to access training opportunities. Justifiably so, given the shortages of substitutes for paraeducators should they attend training during the typical school day where they would normally be providing instruction and programming to students.

Role confusion from absence of a clear job description

When asked if they have job descriptions, many paraeducators report they have none. If they do, most are either out-of-date or no longer reflect the current role of the paraeducator. Many written descriptions add the phrase, "and all other duties as assigned by the supervisor (teacher, principal)," thus put-

ting paras in a position in which they feel obligated to accept any assignment or task, whether they feel qualified to do so...or not.

Paraeducators have often reported that they have been assigned tasks for which they felt they were not qualified, but obligated to perform. The effect of these practices is role confusion about who does what, when and with whom.

Poor supervision and lack of ongoing support

Many paraeducators indicate having little contact with supervising special and general educators. They are rarely observed and provided

with corrective feedback. What support they do receive is often from other paraeducators. As a result, they often feel isolated and alone.

Inadequate performance evaluation

I think this quote from a Vermont paraeducator sums it up: "In the nine years I worked in this district, I have received two evaluations!" Paraeducators often report they are evaluated infrequently, if at all. On those occasions when they are observed, administrators who are unfamiliar with the paraeducators' work often conduct the evaluations, thus making them irrelevant.

Lack of respect as an educational community member

Paraeducators continue to feel they are the lowest on the totem pole. These feelings are certainly substantiated by their poor salaries and benefits, a combination that causes many to leave the profession. Paraeducators across the country report they do not feel respected or valued for their contributions, as so eloquently expressed by a Vermont paraeducator:

“The rewards to be had in doing this are from the kids. In the school where I work, paras are still thought of as housewives with part-time jobs.... We never know what is going on, but are expected to implement decisions that we are never a part of. As far as the pay goes, there is no differential for education or job performance. If you are one of the capable paras, you are asked to do more and more classroom teaching without any additional pay. If you love the kids and are hooked on the learning process, the administration gets an extra teacher in the bargain. Recognition is pretty much lacking. If it were not for the parents and their children, paras would go pretty much unnoticed.”

Overuse of paraeducators (the Band-Aid approach)

Assignment of paraeducators as the one and only method to support students in general education programs has skyrocketed (one has only to check local school budget increases in the area of personnel). Paraeducators certainly do provide the support some students need, but they can also hinder a student's growth. For example, when a paraeducator becomes “velcroed” to a student, the student's social interactions with peers can become significantly affected. Similarly, when a paraeducator becomes the student's primary teacher, the general educator abdicates responsibility for the student, further isolating the student. In such instances, the paraeducator may lack the necessary qualifications and training to effectively implement instructional and behavioral programs. As a result, the student may not develop peer relationships or receive quality instruction. These situations illustrate what I refer to as “irresponsible” inclusion.

Promising Practices

By now you have probably identified practices that may be present in your local school or district. Below are some proposed “promising practices” that are currently being implemented in a number of schools and districts across the country and that could be implemented locally.

Develop comprehensive job descriptions

With input from paraeducators and other key staff (e.g., administrators, special educators) develop job descriptions that include qualifications needed for the position. These might include: orientation and training requirements for the position; duties and responsibilities of the position; and guidelines for supervision, ongoing support and evaluation. Model job descriptions exist in various districts throughout the country.

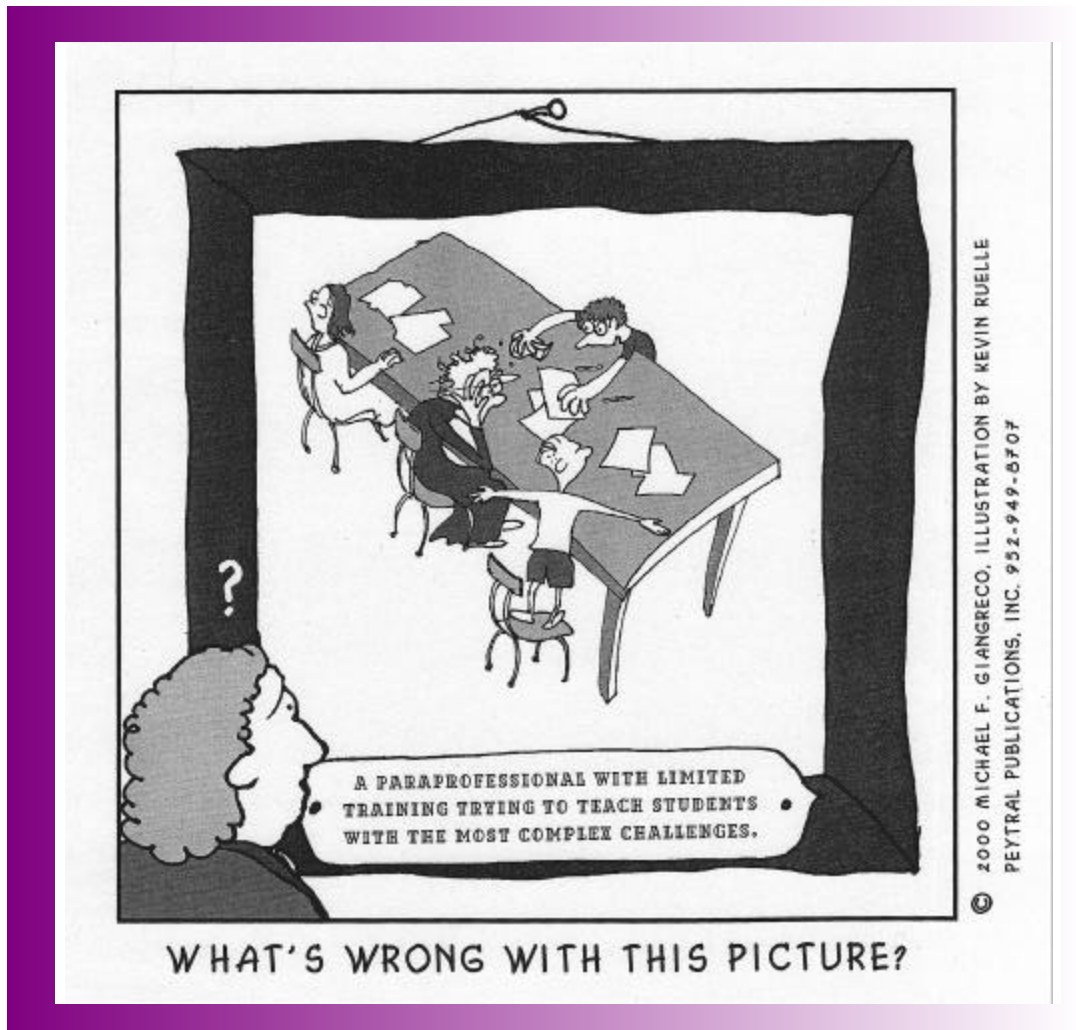
Relevant orientation and professional development

Encourage your district to provide an orientation that includes a review of the district's/school's policies and procedures and orients the paraeducator to the student(s), the classroom and other key staff (e.g., guidance, OT, PT). Parents might participate in this orientation effort, since they have valuable information about their child's learning style.

Paraeducators can help to build relevant professional development programs that meet their unique needs. Some districts have created successful mentoring programs in which

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trained, veteran paraeducators mentor the “new kids on the block.” Others have flexible in-house mechanisms for paraeducators to earn credit for the on-the-job training they receive. Work with your State Departments of Education and institutions of higher education to develop appropriate training for paraeducators. Funding these initiatives is not as difficult as it may seem; many districts can access their professional development funds or state/federal grant funds.



Adequate supervision and ongoing support
Special and general educators who supervise paraeducators need their own professional development program that describes how to best utilize these fellow teachers. Most have never received this information through their pre-service or in-service training programs. An excellent resource book, *Supervising Paraeducators in School Settings: A Team Approach, Second Edition* (Pickett & Gerlach) can help your district to develop a strong staff training program. The National Resource Center for Paraeducators (www.nrcpara.org) provides training and technical assistance, disseminates information about promising practices in the field, conducts research and develops policy related to paraeducator issues and concerns.

Develop an appropriate evaluation system
Suggest linking the job description to the evaluation system, including professional goal set-

ting, so paraeducators can determine how they want to grow during the year. Recommend that those educators who know the work of the paraeducator complete the evaluation, rather than an administrator or supervisor who lacks specific knowledge about the paraeducator's work.

When appropriate, include parents in the hiring process

Parents of students with significant disabilities who need continuous support may know the best "fit" (personality type) for their child and can be key members of the hiring team. As a former district administrator, I know this participation may not always be possible, but providing opportunities for parental input in the hiring process and initial orientation can set the stage for the ongoing relationship the school staff, including the paraeducator, may have with the family.

Value the paraeducator as a member of the team

Acknowledging paraeducators for what they do can range from small things such as using the title “paraeducator,” a more respectful and accurate title description, to increasing salaries and improving benefits. Paraeducators appreciate when their input is recognized and valued, such as through participation in IEP meetings. Encourage teachers to value paraeducators as true team members. Help to educate community and school board members about the importance of these staff members. Suggest creating a committee comprised of staff and community members to brainstorm cost effective ways to celebrate paraeducator accomplishments.

Develop a process for determining when and if paraeducator support is necessary

One of my colleagues developed a three-step team process to determine whether a student requires paraeducator support. The process identifies: 1) the specific student needs, such as safety; 2) what the student can and cannot do and the extent to which s/he needs assistance during the course of the day; and 3) where, when and how the paraeducator will provide support or encourage independence. Implementation of a process such as this ensures that students receive the level of support they need. It also encourages teams to actively discuss how peers will interact with the student, and how gradual independence will occur to the greatest extent possible. Utilizing this planning process can help parents understand that assigning a paraeducator to support their child 100 percent of the day may not be of benefit.

Review staffing assignments

Districts that assign paraeducators to class-



rooms and/or to teachers, not to individual students, help to avoid the “Velcro effect.” Assigning paraeducators to work with a variety of students and developing job-share positions for students with intensive needs are strategies that can address student dependency issues and help reduce paraeducator burnout.

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Conclusion

I hope this article has given you the opportunity to think about some of the challenges facing your school system in the hiring, employment, deployment, training, support and evaluation of the paraeducators. The “promising practices” described are a reality in schools across the country and are “implementable” by working collaboratively with district staff, parents, and other stakeholders. Ultimately, changing poor practices can

result in improved results for children and youth with disabilities. Readers can contact me for models, resources and/or references. There's a lot out there, so the wheel doesn't need to be reinvented!

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